

PERSONNEL NOTEBOOK

For Your Most Important Resource

STRESS ON THE JOB

PART II

Relaxation Techniques

In Part I of “Stress on the Job,” we talked about what stress is, how it evolved in humans, and how it affects us today. We also talked about the four types of support available to deal with stress:

- I. Medical Treatment
- II. Anger Management
- III. Time Management
- IV. Relaxation Techniques

Under item III, Time Management, author Able Mackenzie, in his classic book *The Time Trap*, suggested that solving the problem requires us to first identify it. We ended the last issue with the first nine of his 14 causes of poor time management. In this issue, we will complete that list and continue on to the relaxation techniques.

III Time Management (cont.)

10. **Procrastination** — The inability to prioritize, thinking you can do things off the top of your head at the last minute, attempting to do too much or failing to establish routines. It can also be a habit of doing all the easy, quick things first in order to shorten the list and feel

better, while leaving more important things to accumulate.

11. **Progress reports interfere with work** — A failure to consider reports as part of the task, a lack of procedures or notes to simplify reports, or a belief that paperwork is for clerks to handle.

12. **Self-discipline** — A lack of objectives or priorities, a failure to focus on the task at hand, daydreaming, disinterest, being too easily sidetracked, or not setting up plans and schedules.

13. **Socializing** — The inability to terminate a conversation, overestimating the value or importance of socializing, wanting to be accepted, having a poor physical location in the line of office traffic, or keeping your door open.

14. **Inadequate staff** — The reluctance to delegate, choosing staff for personal reasons instead of for their ability to perform, an inefficient use of staff time, poor management skills or inability to make the case for more staff.

IV Relaxation Techniques

There are many different relaxation techniques. Each is designed for an individual to turn his or her focus inward. In that it deals with the subconscious level, it is the most personal of all the generally recognized techniques, so not every method applies to everyone.

1. Autogenic Training

Developed in Europe in the early 1900s, *autogenic training* involves a concentration and awareness of body sensations. It is used by its practitioners for relieving stress-related disorders, such as anxiety, tension, and insomnia. It is also used for relieving chronic medical conditions such as migraine headaches. In practice, the process involves reversing the flight or fight response, mentioned in Part I of “Stress on the Job,” by releasing the counter chemicals epinephrine and norepinephrine into your system. This is accomplished by practicing the six autogenic formulas or states:

- Focus on a heaviness in the arms or legs.
- Focus on warmth in the arms and legs.
- Focus on warmth in the heart area.
- Focus on breathing.
- Focus on warmth in the abdomen.
- Focus on coolness in the forehead.

2. Biofeedback

The biofeedback method was initially advanced in the 1960s. It is based on the principle that one’s mind can control many of the body’s functions. It professes that the autonomic nervous system (the part we don’t consciously control) is trainable. In practice, instruments are used to measure and display such things as blood pressure, brain activity, stomach acidity, muscle tension, etc. The measurements are shown to the individual and by exercising techniques of concentration (which are taught to him or her) he or she tries to control and alter those readings and thereby those body functions. Primarily because of the instruments needed, biofeedback must be conducted with the aid of a professional.

3. Meditation

A wide variety of choices for meditation are available. Many procedures and religions, including some forms of yoga are popular for personal meditation. Many of these methods can be self-taught. Focusing on the inner self creates a quieting of the mind, emotions, and body. Daily practices can be conducted both indoors and outdoors. Prayer, contemplation, and mantra (phrase repetition) are also considered meditation.

3a. Transcendental Meditation (TM)

Although not as universally popular as it was in its heyday of the 70s and 80s, TM is firmly entrenched as an accepted meditation practice and has a loyal following. Fundamentally, TM practices attempt to achieve a very low level of outward consciousness while allowing the mind to float freely. It is relatively easy to learn and requires you to practice the process for 15 to 20 minutes twice a day. You can learn more about TM at tm.org

3b. Relaxation Response

This involves the repetition of a word or phrase (mantra) while quietly seated for 10 to 20 minutes each day. Relaxation Response is designed to induce the physical body response that is exactly the opposite of the fight or flight response.

The process has been credited with reducing blood pressure and other physical symptoms of stress. The relaxation response can be self-taught, but practitioners say it takes a lot of time and practice. You can learn more about the relaxation response at relaxationresponse.org.

3c. Prayer

Many of the meditations practiced today seem to be a form of prayer or spiritual communication. But, as a straightforward religious concept, can prayer work?

Many Americans today are either not religious or find it uncomfortable to admit having religious beliefs. Public profession of religion is

not popular, but privately, religion is booming almost under the radar as churches of almost all faiths are reporting a major resurgence not seen since the 1950s. Even protagonists say that for many people prayer seems to be effective in producing results.

We aren't going to examine religious beliefs here, but many industrial psychologists find a logical reason as to why religion may work for many. They have asserted that a fundamental method to solving problems and reducing stress is as follows: (a) identify the problem and (b) identify what you want to do to resolve it. That process alone may increase the probability of success. For many, this is what is happening in prayer. They are prioritizing and focusing on the problem and concentrating on the solution they identify.

4. Imagery

One of the more effective methods of controlling stress is also the easiest to practice. Once learned, imagery techniques can almost instantly produce a calming, stress-free state that can be very beneficial to physical, mental, and emotional health, especially if combined with some form of meditation. Imagery should be practiced about 10 minutes each day; many do it at work. If you need to talk to your boss about this, let him or her know of your stress concerns and see if 10 to 15 minutes each day can be used to exercise one or more of the following imagery techniques.

4a. Peaceful Place

One of the simplest and most powerful ways to learn to relax is through the *peaceful place* imagery. It works like this: Imagine yourself in some setting in nature, perhaps high in the mountains or on a beach, near a lake, or in a desert. You're walking along a path in this setting. Notice what the sky looks like, how the air smells, what the ground feels like as you walk. With each step along the path, allow yourself to grow more and more relaxed. As you look ahead you see a little cottage. It's there just for you. Walk up to this cottage. What does it

look like and what is it made of? Go inside and walk around your cabin. Decorate your perfect cabin to your own taste, with your own artwork.

Everything about this place is peaceful. If you like lots of sunlight, then imagine that your cabin has lots of windows with a magnificent view. Sit down in your comfortable chair in your cottage and soak in the relaxation. This is your place, a million miles from nowhere.

The peaceful place imagery can be even more effective if someone can verbally take you through the steps as you are reclined.

4b. The Wave

Do you get so rushed and stressed out at work that you don't feel you have the luxury of relaxing? There is just no opportunity for a break to let go of the stress? Then, *wave imagery*, developed by author Phyllis Krystal, may be right for you. Once you learn how to ride the wave, you can teach yourself to relax in just minutes.

Imagine you are at the beach, lying on the warm sand. The waves are rolling in and each one comes closer and closer until the waves are starting to wash over your body before they roll back. As each wave falls away from you and returns to the sea, tension, anxiety, and stress are removed in the process. With each wave, you feel a little more relaxed. Just feel the wave gently pulling tension out of you.

You can learn more about the wave and other relaxation methods at phyliskrystal.com

4c. The Feather

Imagine you are a feather floating in the air high above the earth. You become more and more relaxed as you slowly float downward through the air. You finally glide to the ground, gently and smoothly touching down. Lying on the ground you are totally and completely relaxed.

4d. The Clock

Designed by David Bresler, Ph.D., the clock imagery works like this: Imagine a clock with

only one hand. When the hand is at the 12 o'clock high position, it represents the most intense stress you have ever experienced, as if you're electrically charged and every hair on your body is standing on end. When the hand is at 6 o'clock, it represents absolutely no stress whatsoever. At that point, you should feel like you're floating in a tank of gelatin, or you're a wet limp noodle lying on the floor.

Now, get in touch with the level of stress you're under at this very second, and set the pointer accordingly. Inhale deeply, and as you exhale, imagine the clock hand slowly moving down toward 6. As you continue to exhale, drop your shoulders and let go.

(Note: David Bresler, Ph.D., is the founder and executive director of The Bresler Center and a presidential appointee to the White House Commission on Complimentary and Alternative Medicine Policy.)

Within the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), stress is now recognized as a handicap. It's also recognized as a job-induced illness by workers' compensation, and is an eligibility under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA). None of this is news to employers who must bear the burden (financially and/or through lost time) of stress-induced illnesses. It is particularly unfortunate for all when an employee may be able to control his/her stress with the previously mentioned techniques.

Of course, reducing your daily intake of caffeine, eating healthy food in moderation, making sleep a priority, taking a 15-minute walk each day, choosing to be more of an optimist, and maybe getting a pet could also help to reduce your stress level.

Bill Cook

Human Resource Associates
Have An Employment Question?
E-mail wcook62@comcast.net.